

plans might be presented for consideration. When at last they were, De Gaulle is said to have exclaimed, "The woman is mad!" Crushed, she resigned her post with the Free French and not long after that was found in her room, collapsed, ill, wasted. An English doctor detected tuberculosis, though not very advanced, in both lungs. Treatment would not have been difficult, but Simone Weil refused to eat. Over a period of a few months she managed to starve herself to death. Did she want to die? Simone Pétrement, unwilling to acknowledge this, suggests she merely wished to "risk death." In any case, the cause of death was given as suicide by the English coroner.

I don't know. You go back over the kind of life lived by Simone Weil, searching for the humanity in her, and you wind up asking yourself how she could have become so widely regarded as a saint—that is, as a moral giant. She seems, rather, a victim—not of the war, not of the times, but of her own luminous intensity. Yet it is this intensity that we find most attractive in her. I've seen it in others, too, and have been drawn to it. Most of these others, as I think back, were Jewish, and many of them were female. What is it in such people? High intelligence, perhaps, an all-consuming hunger for justice, a passionate seriousness—all of these combined in a kind of disproportionate prodigality of spirit.

And finally, I cannot read or write about Simone Weil without being powerfully reminded of the writer and poet Michele Murray. There were many points of likeness between them. Though Michele was as sane as any person I have ever known, she shared that same luminous intensity. With her it was contained, controlled, and directed into her writing. She had converted from Judaism to Catholicism and was herself attracted to Simone Weil, so much so that she had planned a book about her before she died, at the age of forty, several years ago. With both women there comes that awful sense of incompleteness—a sense of loss not just of years to them but of books to us. Most of all I miss the book Michele Murray would have written on Simone Weil. I like to think it would have been a better one than this massive biography by Simone Pétrement. For without wishing to seem ungrateful to Weil's well-intentioned friend for what she has done, I believe there is more to be said about Simone Weil—perhaps in fewer words, more judiciously chosen and gracefully assembled. ☉

Books

Pilgrim's Progress in Wigton

Speak for England

by Melvyn Bragg
Knopf, 512 pp., \$15

Reviewed by Clancy Sigal

IN SEPTEMBER 1939, Melvyn Bragg reminds us, "England was in danger. The danger, which is again with us now, consisted chiefly in not speaking out when we needed to, not standing up for what we believed in. . . ." England has lost its way, and Bragg wants to set the country aright, just as he put his own life in order by returning to his Cumberland roots after the death of his first wife. He was born in Wigton, just south of the Scottish border, and in his latest book he has compiled a massive oral history of this small market and factory town, from the turn of the century to the present day. *Speak for England* has the flat, unpatronizing power of Bragg's Cumbrian novels, such as *The Hired Man* and *A Place In England*—and also their undercurrent of anger, even bitterness, against the centuries-old class system that has darkened the lives of his people for so long. Yet the major flaw in this work is that it is too nice, too filial. There are no scoundrels, no black sheep. The author has given us a sincere, unmalicious, and perhaps oversimple tribute to a place he can always safely return to.

Though he is now a highly paid screenwriter and BBC personality, Bragg still identifies emotionally with his working-class family. The Braggs of Wigton go back 300 years, and yet Melvyn is the first to get a decent education—by state scholarship to Oxford—and to be free to stretch himself to his limits. One of the most touching yet restrained testimonies in the book is that of Bragg's grandmother, seventy-eight-year-old Elizabeth Armstrong, a miner's daughter, who describes a daily

round of misery that is almost medieval—a cycle of near starvation, backbreaking farm chores, the humiliation of standing in a dole queue after her coal-mining husband had had a pit accident. "It was a crime if you were lazy in them days. Something you couldn't live down," declares Mrs. Armstrong with rueful pride, and without a trace of self-pity.

In contrast to down-to-earth people like Mrs. Armstrong, Bragg sees in the rest of



the country what he calls "an infection of will at the top" and a "snobbery which in its dying years has clamped a last grip about England's throat." If the snobs have their way, says Bragg, "then we, like Spain in the seventeenth century, will sink sadly in the West. But within England now there is, as there has been for centuries, a mass of energy; for it to be released . . . there needs to be a general recognition that by taking people as they are now . . . England will be restored."

To lend himself to this restoration,

Clancy Sigal is author of *Going Away*, *Weekend in Dinlock*, and a novel, *Zone of the Interior*.

THE WARREN COMMISSION WAS RIGHT



THE GREATEST COVER-UP OF ALL



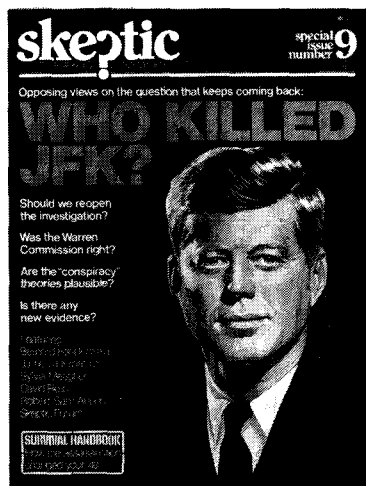
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SATURDAY REVIEW

5111

Bragg spent five years faithfully recording "the voice of the people" of Wigton for a "human history" to set beside the conventional, Oxford-taught texts that are usually "testament[s] of what the leaders of society have ordered to be done."

As if slightly unsure of them, Bragg presents his people as almost too trusting, fair-minded, unradical. Many of the older ones, having endured two major wars and a long, racking depression (85 percent un-

nary Englishman is conditioned to circumspection, even secretiveness, and pledged to a conspiracy of silence and caution. In a place like Wigton, where the only work comes from two huge, paternalistic factories and a few extremely conservative farmers, this prudent tendency to "tell him just so much and no more" is impelled by self-preservation, even (though Bragg might deny this) by simple fear. The reluctance of Bragg's "speakers" completely to let their hair down makes the absence of town characters and compulsive talkers all the more glaring. For all their exaggerations, it is such eccentrics who might have injected a useful dash of grit, even of violence, into this suspiciously well-balanced group portrait.

BRAGG's discretion is pardonable, because he knows that the people he loves are vulnerable to the continual, nagging prejudice built into the English class system. But by being needlessly protective, Bragg denies his friends a certain human fullness, and this unwittingly plays into the hands of the condescending critics whom Bragg rightly resents.

My other worry is the author's claim that his book is "a representative record of English life during this century." Though I, too, came to admire Bragg's neighbors almost as much as he does, not for a moment was I convinced of their universality. Wigton is local, particular, a uniquely attractive mix of town and country. Most of England, *pace* all that Ruritanian propaganda about thatched roofs and pastoral meadows dished out by the British Tourist Board, is highly urbanized, crowded, and—dare one say it?—richer in texture and even humor. (As a Londoner with a special fondness for large northern multiracial cities like Liverpool and Manchester, I am admittedly prejudiced.)

Still, readers who carefully pick their way through these interviews will be richly rewarded with a fascinating saga of personal memoirs that do, in fact, add up to the kind of "people's history" that (as Bragg correctly asserts) almost always gets left out of the academic books and tourist guides. Up to World War II, Wigton folk worked hard and unquestioningly and respected their betters; they died in the trench-abattoirs of Passchendaele without resentment. Women understood their place. But after the General Strike of 1926 and the Depression, which hit the North like a never-ending hurricane, the war against Hitler opened up possibilities till then undreamed of by ordinary people.

Servicemen sent back their pay; women came out—and stayed out—of the kitchen to make munitions. For the first time in hundreds of years, many average Wigtoners were offered what peacetime English society had always denied them: richness of choice. Politically, working people at home let their government know that if total war meant sacrifices from all, then the postwar rewards must be equally shared as well.

The symbol of this revolutionary change was the 1944 Education Act, enabling bright young boys like Melvyn Bragg to forge ahead on sheer brainpower. At Oxford, mixing with the posh and learned, he became a self-confessed "culture vulture" and abandoned Wigton for the cash and status rewards of London. Today, by virtue of his eight novels, his membership on the Arts Council, and his TV eminence, he is a celebrity. He has a Hampstead home, gossip columns follow his doings, and—as if to mark his ascendancy—he is frequently satirized in that Burke's Peerage of the intelligentsia, *Private Eye*. So far, that's the familiar Pilgrim's Progress of most "provincial" writers in England who take off for the southern lights of the Home Counties at the first sign of public recognition.

But Bragg somehow is different. He went back, and he now divides his time between London and Wigton. Among the many photographs in this decent and valuable book is one showing four generations of smiling Braggs on a settee: Bragg's grandmother, father, himself, and his teen-age daughter. All look in place, *there*. One senses how overridingly important it is to Bragg that he reimmerge himself in the deep, broad-living continuity that so successfully shaped him. ©

Wit Twister No. 90

Edited by Arthur Swan

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word. Answers on page 61.

His lofty — — — — —
ill becomes the priest;

While deprecating greed, he eyes the feast.

Since nothing has been — — — — —
— — — — —, the divine

— — — — — God's
blessings like a vintage wine.

A. S.



Illustrations: From the book jacket.

employed in one two-year period), now look back with the pride of lucky survivors.

On the whole, Bragg's Wigtoners don't complain. This may partly reflect the traditional stoicism of the working class in northern England. But the even, placid tone of Bragg's informants also owes much to his method of screening out the "characters" and big talkers. He admits that he "itched to embroider and take off gossip," but he forced himself not to fictionalize or dwell on unpleasanties. It's our loss. As every journalist knows, and as my own travels through Britain confirm, the ordi-